

July 5, 2000: Commission Requests 'More Energetic' U.S. Response to Religious Killings in Indonesia

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today wrote to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright with recommendations for a stronger U.S. government response to the Muslim-Christian violence wracking Indonesia's Maluku Islands, formerly known as the Spice Islands. The violence has reportedly killed at least 3,000 people in the past year. The text of the letter follows below:

The Honorable Madeleine K. Albright

Secretary of State

U.S. Department of State

2201 C Street, N.W.

Washington, DC 20520Dear Secretary Albright: The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is gravely concerned about the current communal violence in the Maluku region of Indonesia. There are reports that at least 3,000 Muslims and Christians have been killed since the outbreak of violence in January 1999, and hundreds are believed to have died in the last two weeks. The situation worsens as the killing continues and supplies of food and medicine reportedly dwindle in the region. The Commission is particularly concerned because there is evidence to suggest that the Indonesian government is tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom such as murder, forced mass resettlement, and torture. There appears to be little question but that the targets and victims of such violence are selected on the basis of their religion. Moreover, places of worship have been primary targets for destruction. The Commission is aware that the Administration and you personally have spoken out in response to the recent violence, and have sought, in our bilateral relations with Indonesia, to support President Wahid in his efforts to control the unrest. However, the Commission believes that the serious escalation of violence in the Malukus in recent weeks requires a more energetic response on the part of the United States. The Commission respectfully recommends that the United States Government: 1) use all diplomatic means at its disposal to encourage the Indonesian government to stop the violence and to investigate and prosecute those responsible; 2) provide whatever assistance is necessary to help the Indonesian government in these efforts as well as to alleviate the humanitarian situation; 3) monitor closely the implementation of the state of civil emergency in the Malukus that President Wahid declared on June 25, 2000; and 4) if the Indonesian government is unable to control the violence, press for the deployment of an international peacekeeping force, as was done in East Timor. The efforts undertaken so far by the Indonesian government have been inadequate to quell the violence. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the government can do more, but is unable or unwilling to do so. There are reports that members of the Indonesian security forces in the Malukus have taken sides in the fighting between Muslims and Christians; some have participated in the fighting while others may have supplied weapons to the combatants. The so-called "Lasker Jihad" group, led by Jaffar Umar Thalib, has for a number of weeks openly called for violence against Christians in the Malukus. Thousands of the Lasker group have been able to travel, and ship weapons, to the Malukus despite the government's announcement of a blockade of the region. Because the Commission has been denied access to cable traffic with any U.S. embassy, including the one in Jakarta, we would appreciate additional information from the Department regarding: are there factions within the military encouraging or participating in the violence and, if so, at what level of the military hierarchy; has the military failed to carry out any of President Wahid's orders in relation to the situation in the Malukus? what is the Indonesian government doing to ensure the neutrality and effectiveness of the security forces in the Malukus, and to control outside provocateurs and paramilitary groups? what legal power does President Wahid possess that would allow him to respond more effectively to the violence, and is he able as a political matter to carry out his full legal powers? are investigations and prosecutions taking place with respect to previous incidents of violence? are sophisticated weapons being used in the violent attacks, and, if so, where are the weapons coming from? has the Indonesian government been able to do more to stop communal violence in other situations, such as Aceh or East Timor? what has the Indonesian government done to promote tolerance among Christians and Muslims? The Commission fully appreciates the enormously difficult situation confronting President Wahid and the obstacles facing him and Indonesia in that country's transition to democracy, and in the struggle for human rights and religious freedom there. In that context it is all the more important to urge that whatever measures the Indonesian government takes to prevent further violence are consistent with democratic principles and international humanitarian and human rights standards. The Commission will continue to monitor closely events in the Malukus, and we appreciate your consideration of our recommendations and our request for information. Thank you for your close attention to this urgent matter and your continuing support for religious freedom in Indonesia. Respectfully yours, Elliott Abrams

Hon. Elliott Abrams, Chair

- Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, Vice Chair Rabbi David Saperstein Laila Al-Marayati, M.D. Hon. John R. Bolton Dean Michael K. Young Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick Nina Shea Justice Charles Z. Smith Ambassador Robert Seiple, Ex-Officio Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director